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# Crossing Cultures and a Millennium with Kao-tai: How a Time-Traveler from the Tenth Century can Prepare Business Students for the Twenty-First

Kandace Einbeck  
*University of Colorado at Boulder*

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Kandace Einbeck  
*University of Colorado at Boulder*

CROSSING CULTURES AND A MILLENNIUM WITH  
KAO-TAI: HOW A TIME-TRAVELER FROM THE  
TENTH CENTURY CAN PREPARE BUSINESS  
STUDENTS FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST

INTRODUCTION

I would not undertake this journey again. . . . If it were possible, I would return immediately. Though it is summer here, I feel as if I have been cast out into an indescribably cold, alien place. (Rosendorfer: Letter 1, 8)<sup>10</sup>

Students, interns, and business travelers facing an international assignment may well feel as abandoned as the protagonist of Herbert Rosendorfer's novel *Letters back to Ancient China* (*Briefe in die chinesische Vergangenheit*) during their first encounters with a new culture. Language educators and business professionals agree that the extra-linguistic cultural differences of the host country are among the most significant challenges facing expatriates. As teachers of language and culture, we must not only impart linguistic training and country-specific cultural information, but we need to provide students the *tools* they need to make the most of culture shock and methods they can later apply themselves to unlock the secrets of another culture when far away from our classrooms. The focus of this article is a work of fiction, but let me assure the reader of this business language journal that the paper is by no means an analysis of the novel as a work of literature, but rather a discussion of how the novel offers insights into a different culture and, more importantly, into the process of developing intercultural

<sup>10</sup>All English quotations are from Mike Mitchell's translation of Rosendorfer's *Briefe in die chinesische Vergangenheit*. The original German is offered in the footnotes. "Ich würde die Reise nicht noch einmal machen. . . . Wenn ich könnte, würde ich sofort zurückkehren. Ich fühle mich in eine Fremde von unbeschreiblicher Kälte hinausgeworfen. (Obwohl es auch hier Sommer ist.)" (1. Brief, 7).

competence. In this article, I do not treat the book as a work of art, but as a teaching tool. I will describe the novel, relate it to various theories of development of intercultural competence and show how it can be used successfully for students or interns approaching any new or foreign culture, not just Chinese or German.

#### SUMMARY OF THE NOVEL

Despite its name, Herbert Rosendorfer's 1983 novel, *Letters back to Ancient China*, has much more to do with modern Europe than with the Chinese past. Kao-tai, the protagonist and writer of the letters of this epistolary novel, is a respected Mandarin living in tenth-century China. A wealthy man, with numerous wives and concubines, Kao-tai is the highly educated "Prefect of the 29 Moss-grown crags Guild of Poets," living during the Sung Dynasty in Kai-feng. Leading his life in intellectual circles, he sometimes serves as advisor to members of the imperial government. He and a friend, Dji-gu, have built a time-machine, in which Kao-tai hopes to travel a thousand years ahead in time in order to discover what China will be in the twentieth century.

The machine is not described, but it obviously works — after a fashion. Kao-tai does travel ahead in time and writes, as promised, letters to his friend Dji-gu, waiting patiently back in the tenth century, to tell him what the Middle Kingdom's future will hold. The novel consists of these thirty seven letters.

However, from the beginning something has gone terribly wrong. Due to a miscalculation, our hero lands in the twentieth century all right, but not in China. He wakes up on a bridge, not, as he imagines, in twentieth-century Kai-feng, but in the city of "Min-chen" (Munich) in a strange land called "Ba-Yan" (Bavaria).<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, it takes him an entire month to figure out he is not in China anymore. His problems begin at once; still dressed in the proper garb of a tenth-century Mandarin, Kao-tai is almost run over by a car, and is promptly arrested by the policeman who has come to investigate the accident. After a night in jail, where no one can understand his language, it is clear he is neither drunk nor crazy, so he is released into the custody of a friend of the judge, a history professor named Mr. Shi-shmi. With his help, Kao-tai spends the next

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<sup>11</sup>Interestingly enough, the English translation goes on to mention Zha-ma-ni (Germany) but the German version does not. Nowhere in the German version is Germany mentioned by name; the location is always referred to as München or Bayern.

eight months deciphering the mysteries of this new century and strange country. He discovers the delights and frustrations of “Ba-Yan” from the Oktoberfest to the Opera, from strip joints to traffic jams. He learns what has happened in the intervening millennium, about Marco Polo’s visit to China and Columbus’ voyages to America. Kao-tai discusses everything from Schopenhauer and Freud to the cold war and acid rain, rides his first tram, goes shopping (his first purchase: a blue and yellow rubber dinghy), visits factories and government offices, talks to poets and teachers. In this way, his experiences parallel those of our students and interns in Europe. The students, must explore the transportation systems, as well as new ideas; they, too, go shopping in the local stores while struggling with the language; but they, like he, find comfort in letters from home and in the friendships they form, and eventually decipher the culture.

Herbert Rosendorfer, the author of the novel, was neither on my MA nor my PhD reading lists, and I suspect not on many others, but he is one of the most popular authors in Germany today, although he has kept his day job as a district court judge in Munich. *Briefe in die chinesische Vergangenheit*, first published in 1983, was a best-seller in Germany, selling over a million copies in German. In 1997 it became accessible to non-German readers through Mike Mitchell’s translation as *Letters Back to Ancient China*.<sup>12</sup>

#### INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE AS A GOAL

Several scholars offer insights which are helpful to understanding this novel as a study in the development of an individual’s intercultural competence. Michael Agar, an anthropologist, emphasizes that we need a new definition of culture and proposes the term “languaculture,” which consists of both *rich points*, defined as “things that strike you with their difficulty, their complexity, their inability to fit into the resources you use to make sense of the world” (231), and the *frames* of interpretation around them. At first these frames are the ones the observer in a foreign culture brought with himself out of his own culture, but they are ever-changing. Through contact with the foreign culture, through contact with actions, people, their customs, traditions, history, and art, one gains new

<sup>12</sup> Rosendorfer’s sequel: *Die grosse Umwendung: Neue Briefe in die chinesische Vergangenheit*, Kiepenheuer & Witsch/VVA, appeared in 1997. In this book Kao-tai returns, this time to the reunified Germany, but then travels to other European countries and even to New York.

frames of cultural interpretation, or at least changes the shape of the original frames through which the new culture is viewed. It is important for sojourners in a new culture to be aware that looking through the frame of the culture they started with has distorted their views of the new culture:

To build new frames, you have to realize that your old frames, the one that you may not have known you had, are only one of a number of possibilities, an arbitrary rather than a “natural” way of seeing, thinking and acting. . . . Formerly taken-for-granted frames come into consciousness and enable you to start building new ones to get you from where you started to where you want to be, capable of handling the rich points [of the culture] that created the problem in the first place. (Agar 232)

Edward Taylor also talks about frames and the dynamic relationship between an individual’s own culture and a new one encountered. He emphasizes that to truly understand a new culture, strangers must “become aware of their long-standing and taken-for-granted meaning perspective” and must call its validity into question. In return, “one of the most effective ways to learn about oneself is by taking seriously the cultures of others” (402). So once the sojourner has come into contact with another culture, one culture (including one’s own) can only be understood in the context of the other. In order to reach this level the stranger must experiment and depend on feedback from members of the target culture. Taylor goes on to discuss how this can be accomplished based on a ten-step learning model theory of perspective transformation.

Like the anthropologist Agar, the linguist Alvino Fantini links the concepts of culture and language in “linguaculture,” and emphasizes the active nature of attaining intercultural competence. He relates David Kolb’s experiential learning model (which states that concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation are all essential to learning) to the cultural acquisition process. Fantini describes this process as moving from inspection to introspection (Comparisons, 168). This means that the process of acquiring a linguaculture involves a progression from inspection of the outward artifacts of the culture to introspection as to why people might participate in the observed behavior. More importantly, this process now

includes introspection by the learners as to exactly what it is in their own culture that may make others' behavior seem strange to them. "One does not add LC2 (linguaculture 2) competence without also experiencing its effects on the existing paradigm. Quite the contrary, the LC1 becomes increasingly susceptible to introspection and change as one interacts and reflects about the LC2 and LC1 and the dynamic between them" (174).

In spite of all these theories, the concept of just what "culture" is remains elusive. The definition I found most useful in the context of this novel is a rather indirect one by Ross Steele: "Culture is the invisible component that becomes visible when foreign language learners begin to converse with a native speaker and realize that the linguistic code by itself does not guarantee successful communication" (72). In other words, it's what you were missing when things go wrong — when you know you've said the right words, but you still cannot make yourself understood to a member of the target culture. In *Letters Back to Ancient China*, we are dealing with a tenth-century Chinese who doesn't even know at first that he's in twentieth-century Munich. Things can't help but go wrong, so this book provides plenty of opportunities for culture to "become visible."

#### WHY TEACH CULTURE-LEARNING STRATEGIES?

Is it necessary to teach culture for study abroad students and interns? Won't they learn about the culture anyway as they live, study and work abroad? If language is as inextricably tied to the culture embedded in it (and in which it is embedded) as Agar, Taylor, and Fantini maintain, why should we have to teach it explicitly? To a certain extent this is probably true, students will acquire some of the target culture as they acquire the target language in country. However, linguistic competence does not always lead to the intercultural competence we aim for. Discussing the concept of intercultural competence in the classroom and making students aware of potential problems and strategies for dealing with them can enhance its acquisition once they arrive on the job for the internship.

In a 1988 study of fifty-one multinational companies, foreign language ability ranked tenth in importance of eleven criteria for a company's candidates for overseas assignments (Machan, 138). While the business and professional world outside the academy is not convinced of the utility of foreign *language* proficiency in their working environment, it is clear that they value cultural competence as a desirable

skill for their employees. Although business professionals may not always see the connection between language and culture, they do value cross-cultural competence and accuse US universities of not providing this crucial asset. According to Bikson and Law, reporting on a Rand Corporation survey of sixteen corporations and an equal number of academic institutions, corporate respondents described cross-cultural competence as “*the* critical new human resource requirement for internationally competitive firms” (13). The corporations lamented US job candidates’ lack of cross-cultural competence in comparison with foreign candidates and described them as linguistically deprived. One of them “wouldn’t even waste time looking on US college campuses” for potential employees who had both technical and intercultural skills (14).

International companies do know that cross-cultural competence can mean the success of a business deal and that the lack thereof contributes significantly to an inability of its expatriate employees to adapt to their new situations. Business magazines, such as *Global Workplace* report that “cultural adaptation trouble is one of the leading causes of failed assignments” (Frazee 15). Frazee also states that although 61% of companies provide at least one day of cultural preparation, over two-thirds of expatriates found that their training in “cultural self-awareness, adaptation processes and understanding background” issues had been insufficient or non-existent (22). Perhaps this is the reason that only 39% of expatriates were willing to return abroad.

Studies conducted in the 70s and 80s demonstrated that companies generally agreed that their employees were “inadequately prepared to handle issues arising from cultural differences” (Hedderich 1997, 42). Things have not changed much since then. In a recent study, Norbert Hedderich surveyed 324 members of the German American Chamber of Commerce. They ranked training in cross-cultural issues equally important as business German language training: 56% ranked cross-cultural as important or very important vs. 59% for German business language (Hedderich 48).

Camille Vande Berg points out that language educators and business professionals often have very different perceptions of how much or even whether foreign language training is a desirable prerequisite for employment in international corporations and she urges these two groups to communicate with each other. John Grandin, a university professor, and Eric Dehmel, a human resources director for an international

engineering corporation, have done just that by studying TRW Corporation's engineers' attitudes toward foreign language education and cultural training. Their study found that a majority (29 out of 54) of the engineers responding to the survey thought that cultural perspectives did affect productivity and even more felt that productivity would be improved by a better mutual understanding of the cultural perspectives of the other branches of their own company. Fifty percent felt that language was rarely a communication problem. Interestingly, while most respondents felt that they understood the cultural differences themselves, they felt misunderstood by the others (who, in turn, thought they were understanding the first group), a discrepancy perhaps explained by their mere surface or stereotypical understanding of those cultural differences (Grandin and Dehmel 5–6). Grandin and Dehmel therefore recommend that educational institutions recognize that mastery of a second language does not guarantee cultural knowledge or sensitivity and that language study must explicitly include issues of culture and cross-cultural communication.

So if we, as language educators, are training students in business language with the intention of preparing them for roles in international business, we had better be training them in what has been called “linguaculture” (Fantini) or “languaculture” (Agar), because that is what companies value. When these employees go abroad, they will show their employers that their abilities to speak the language are beneficial as well.

#### WHY USE THIS PARTICULAR BOOK TO TEACH?

Why not use a textbook on intercultural communications to teach culture? I first used this novel with a class of American junior year abroad students in Austria, as part of a course entitled “German Authors Encounter Other Cultures.” As the students experienced the various stages of culture shock and adaptation in their own lives during that year, reading about it from another perspective helped them understand what was happening to them. It is always easier to see the frame around someone else than the frame around oneself. If they are to become aware of their frames they must consciously look at the dynamic between the cultures. I wanted the students to not only engage in inspection but also in introspection, as Kao-tai does. The students were assigned parts of the book in four stages, spread out over the entire course of the semester, so that they would be reading about Kao-tai's transition through the various



stages of cultural adaptation at the same time that they were experiencing it themselves.

For three main reasons this novel lends itself as a suitable “intercultural competence textbook.” First of all, it is an *authentic text*. The novel is a German book, that is, it takes place in a German (Bavarian) setting and was written for Germans. Language instructors use many authentic texts in our classes — but usually in inauthentic ways. After all, we teachers use that menu we stole from Wienerwald to teach food vocabulary, not really to order a meal. At first, I saw this book, written for German readers, as the usual way of using authentic texts inauthentically, that is, to teach students something about Germany and its customs. However, as I read I realized that using it didactically was a more authentic use than most, for this book is written as a satire, in the fine tradition of Montesquieu’s *Lettres Persanes* and Goldsmith’s *Citizen of the World*. Through it, Germans see themselves and their culture with new, more critical eyes, and in this course, I used it to help my students see German culture with critical eyes, and in doing so view their own cultural biases from a new perspective as well, a use very close to what I feel Rosendorfer intended.

Secondly, the language is not difficult — this is a modern author, not Schiller, and this straightforward language and the humor in the book make it a relatively accessible and painless way of introducing self-reflection. Third, the novel does afford us some information about “Ba-Yan”: Kao-tai discusses such topics as pollution, the role of women, Schelling, and Bavarian history. In addition, the book provides some interesting and amusing anecdotes, which Agar would classify as rich points. However, generalizing from anecdotes often leads to extrapolating to rigid behaviors in a culture (Galloway 89) and to reinforcing stereotypes. Instead, I want the students to concentrate more on the process of acquiring intercultural competence rather than learning the specific factual information about Germany provided by the novel.

Kao-tai undergoes three processes in the course of the novel, which all of the students and interns in a new culture will have to experience themselves:

- 1) The process of moving from what Fantini describes as “inspection to introspection”; To use Agar’s terminology, this would be a movement from observation of the “rich points” of the culture to

an awareness of the frame around the culture and of one's own frame, frames that make these rich points so visible.

- 2) The process of developing intercultural competence that this inspection to introspection makes possible; and
- 3) The non-linear emotional process that accompanies this development of intercultural competence and enhancement of the attributes that enable Kao-tai and the students to succeed in all of these processes. Analyzing how he succeeds can make their necessary transition from culture shock to cultural mediator less traumatic and more effective.

Let me deal with the second point first and use it as a framework for the other two with examples from the novel.

#### DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

From the many proposed models of the development of intercultural (or transcultural or linguacultural) competence, I chose to apply Milton Bennett's, because it is descriptive, fairly easy to understand, and familiar to many language educators.

#### BENNETT'S MODEL OF INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

Bennett first describes three ethnocentric stages:

- 1) Denial — In this stage, the individual has no knowledge of the culture or fails to recognize cultural differences.
- 2) Defense — the differences are seen, but evaluated negatively in three possible ways:
  - A. Denigration — target culture put down through overt stereotyping;
  - B. Superiority — own culture seen as superior (paternalism);
  - C. Reversal — denigration of own culture; target culture seen as superior.
- 3) Minimization — the sojourner sees surface differences but believes "deep down we're all the same."

Bennett then discusses three ethnorelative stages:

- 4) Acceptance — the sojourner recognizes that the target culture provides alternative resolutions and appreciates cultural difference, suspending judgment;

- 5) Adaptation — the sojourner can see through the eyes of the other and can communicate with the other, adapt socially;
- 6) Integration — creating an adaptable identity, not based on any culture, the sojourner sees things from a variety of cultural viewpoints. An individual in this last stage would be described as an “intercultural speaker / mediator” by Steele or an “intercultural practitioner” by Agar. Fantini would see him as someone interculturally and communicatively competent in the linguaculture.

A brief look at the stages of Kao-tai’s journey will demonstrate how they fit into the above paradigm.

#### *1) Denial*

In some respects Kao-tai *is* in the denial stage at the first part of his journey, since it takes him over a month to realize that he is in a different part of the globe as well as in a different millennium. Despite some very obvious signs — the river that he has landed near is flowing in the wrong direction; the hills have disappeared — a change of location doesn’t enter the realm of possibility for him. However, since he has intentionally gone on a time-trip to see what the future is like, he expects some differences and so he attributes them to the passage of ten centuries rather than change of location

One could argue, however, that Kao-tai does not experience the denial phase at all, since he does know that he has gone a thousand years ahead in time and therefore expects there to be some differences, though certainly not as many as he confronts. His reaction to these differences is typical, first amazement and then defense, the second of Bennett’s stages. After several weeks, however, he realizes he is half a world and ten centuries away from home. He intellectually, consciously, knows that he should not expect sameness, yet he continually seeks the confirmation of his own values, of his own subconscious expectations.

#### *2) Defense*

Kao-tai engages in two of Bennett’s defense mechanisms, denigration and superiority, during the first few weeks of his sojourn in Germany. Kao-tai is very critical of his new surroundings and the people he meets. He calls them the “bignoses,” who seem to be “our barbaric descendants,

a coarse rabble completely lacking in dignity” (Letter 2,10)<sup>13</sup> and he criticizes their brutality, abominable manners, perverted customs, lack of respect for authority and ancestors, and vulgar, deep loud voices: “Dirt and noise, that is what dominates life here, that is the abyss to which our future leads” (Letter 3,13).<sup>14</sup> This he blames on the consumption of cows’ milk, which would “turn the stomach of a *normal* person” (Letter 11, 78). Kao-tai, of course, considers himself the norm. He has not yet reached the point where he can recognize his own culture as the frame through which he will see all others.

Simultaneously, he engages in Bennett’s mechanism of superiority: he sees his own culture as superior and often extols the virtues of China by comparison. Bavaria’s capital city does not come off very well in a comparison with China’s.

Our colossal Sublime Imperial City is like a dreamy, idyllic hamlet set amid rolling countryside compared with this gigantic monster of a . . . city is not the right word any more. . . . a raging globe of stone and iron. There is no splendor in this city. (Letter 8, 50)<sup>15</sup>

He expresses “thoughts of our beautiful past together” to his friend back home (Letter 4, 24), contrasting these feelings with the chaos into which he seems to have plunged. Our students may do the same in their homesick moments.

### 3) *Minimization*

Kao-tai seldom uses the mechanism of minimization. Twentieth-century Munich differs so greatly from his homeland that his culture shock is immediate and intense. At one point he even wonders whether he has gone ten thousand years into the future instead of only one thousand. Only occasionally does he find parallels between his ancient

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<sup>13</sup>“ein würdeloser, verrohter Haufen” (2. Brief, 8).

<sup>14</sup>“Schmutz und Lärm — das beherrscht das Leben hier. Schmutz und Lärm ist der Abgrund, in den unsere Zukunft mündet” (3. Brief, 11).

<sup>15</sup>“Unsere gewaltige Erhabene Kaiserstadt ist wie ein verträumtes, idyllisches Nest in sanfter Gegend gegen diese über alle Maßen gigantische . . . Stadt kann man nicht mehr sagen: übereinandergeschichtete Zusammenballung von ungeheuren großen Städten, eine Stadt aus Städten, eine tosende Kugel aus Stein und Eisen” (8. Brief, 50).

and this modern culture, for example, when reflecting on the corrupt politicians to be found in both societies.

*Interlude: the process of moving from ethnocentric inspection to ethnorelative introspection*

At this point, between the three ethnocentric and the three ethnorelative stages, Taylor finds Bennett's and other models inadequate, for while Bennett states that learning must take place in order for a transition from an ethnocentric stage to an ethnorelative stage to occur, his outline does not provide a detailed explanation of this learning process. Taylor relies on Mezirow's transformative learning theory and relates its ten steps to intercultural training in order to demonstrate that the learning does not rely on cognitive processing of information alone, nor only on critical thinking, but also on experimentation and feedback (Taylor 403).

I have condensed Taylor's ten steps into a four-step process describing the movement from alienation and observation to an ethnorelative attitude as illustrated in the novel. We can teach this process, these strategies, to our students by demonstrating how Kao-tai not only engages in inspection of the products of this culture, but in every case in introspection, as well. Students can learn Kao-tai's four steps through this introspection process by asking themselves the following questions:

- 1) When we see an event or an artifact of culture we engage in inquiry: what is it?
- 2) What are some possible meanings of this artifact?
- 3) What underlying background is necessary for me to interpret this correctly — and this includes: a) What part of my own culture (my "frame") is keeping me from seeing the true meaning; and b) What influence do my preconceived notions of the target culture have on my perception? How do they skew my understanding?
- 4) How does this event fit into the whole of what we call culture and how should I now act?

Students will see that to answer these questions they must observe, take risks to try out possible explanations, and must continually revise their understanding of their own and other cultures.

Never satisfied with mere description, Kao-tai always tries to interpret what he observes. For example, in his fifth letter, he describes the rather restrictive and uncomfortable clothing of the bignoses (Letter 5, 25–6):

This shia-te jacket has a collar that is uncomfortable enough, but they make matters worse by tying round it a strip of cloth, the function of which is a complete mystery. The cloth strip has to hang down over your chest a prescribed length. Many men wear these cloth strips, indeed I have to confess that at the moment they are the only means I have of identifying men as men, since women seem not to wear them.

These cloth strips come in several different colours. The one Mr. Shi-shmi has given me is red, he himself wears a blue one. Tying this cloth strip is incredibly complicated; I can't manage it myself yet, Mr. Shi-shmi always has to help me. (Letter 5, 25)<sup>16</sup>

He notices an artifact, neckties, and assumes that they must have a purpose. He is engaging in observation, and he accepts wearing these uncomfortable clothes since he realizes that if he blends in better with the crowd, he can observe others more successfully. After all, that is what he has come all this way to do. Otherwise, he finds that the Germans stare at him all the time and do not behave naturally.

However, Kao-tai does more than observe and describe. He moves to the second stage of learning and proposes possible explanations for this necktie phenomenon:

Since the cloth strips seem to perform no practical function, I assume they must be insignia of rank. I only hope that a red strip corresponds more or less to my position as a mandarin of the fourth-highest grade and Prefect of the Nine-and-twenty Moss-

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<sup>16</sup>“Der an sich schon unbequeme Kragen dieser dünnen Hem-hem-Jacke wird noch dadurch eingeengt, daß ein Streifen Stoffes, dessen Funktion nicht ohne weiteres klar ist, darum gebunden wird. Der Stoff-Streifen muß auf bestimmte Länge vorn herunterhängen. Viele Männer tragen solche Stoff-Streifen, ja, ich muß gestehen: nur an so einem Stoff-Streifen erkenne ich — vorerst-, daß es sich um einen Mann handelt, mit dem ich es zu tun habe, denn Weiber tragen solche Stoff-Streifen nicht. Es gibt solche Stoff-Streifen in verschiedenen Farben. Der, den Herr Shi-shmi mir gegeben hat, ist rot. Er selbst trägt einen blauen. Das Binden des Stoff-Streifens ist eine ungeheuer komplizierte Sache. Ich beherrsche es noch nicht; Herr Shi-shmi muß mir immer helfen” (5. Brief, 24).

grown Craggs Guild of Poets. And does the blue strip Mr. Shi-shmi always ties round his collar denote a low rank? (26)<sup>17</sup>

In fact, he has two explanations. First, the role of a necktie is to help people distinguish men from women. His difficulty in telling them apart is rooted in the target culture's manner of dress, since men and women in Germany both tend to wear pants, and also in the home culture's tradition that men wear beards or mustaches. Because the clothing standards that he has previously used are not useful to him here, he seeks another criterion and chooses this article of clothing, for which he can find no other logical explanation. Secondly, he assumes neckties serve as an indication of rank. Once again, it is the frame of his own culture that causes this erroneous assumption. Rank is so important in his culture that he assumes it must be so here in the twentieth century, as well. He feels very uncomfortable not knowing whether someone is of high or low rank, because otherwise he does not know how to behave. He feels that something this important must be expressed in the target culture in some way:

I find it confusing that I do not know the order of precedence here and therefore cannot tell precisely how I should conduct myself towards other people. I have not yet got so far in the local language to ask about such a complex matter. I don't think Mr. Shi-shmi has a higher rank than I do, and he always returns my bow with exactly the same bow, but I would like to know for sure. I hope his rank is not too far below mine. (26)<sup>18</sup>

Kao-tai does not yet engage in the third stage of learning; he does not see his interpretation as skewed by his own culture. He does, however, experiment with his idea and tries to extend it and see it as part of a system. He later finds that he can also distinguish men from women by

<sup>17</sup>“Da ich keinerlei Funktion der Stoff-Streifen erkennen kann, nehme ich an, daß es sich um Rangabzeichen handelt. Ich hoffe, daß der rote Stoff-Streifen einigermaßen meiner Würde als Mandarin der vierthöchsten Rangklasse und Präfekt der Dichtergilde ‘Neunundzwanzig moosbewachsene Felswände’ entspricht. Bezeichnet etwa der blaue Streifen, den Herr Shi-shmi sich umbindet, einen niedrigeren Rang?” (5. Brief, 24).

<sup>18</sup>“Es verwirrt mich, daß ich die Rangordnung nicht kenne und somit mein Verhalten nicht richtig bemessen kann. In der Kenntnis der hiesigen Sprache bin ich noch nicht so weit vorgedrungen, daß ich so etwas Kompliziertes fragen könnte. Ich glaube zwar nicht, daß Herr Shi-shmi einen höheren Rang einnimmt als ich, und meine Verbeugungen erwidert er immer exakt in gleicher Weise, ich wüßte es aber doch gern. Ich hoffe, daß er nicht allzu tief unter mir steht” (5. Brief, 24).

the color of their umbrellas. Men always carry black, whereas those of the women come in a variety of colors. He tries to fit this into the skewed, preconceived notion of the culture that he has constructed, and speculates whether the color of a woman's umbrella is some sort of indication of rank, or whether perhaps wives and concubines carry umbrellas of the same colors as their husbands' neckties. We continuously build "false," but increasingly accurate, models of what we think the target culture is. Fantini points out that being a successful member of one's own lingua-culture can be more of an impediment than an asset to acquisition of a second one (Comparisons, 178). So it is with Kao-tai. He is partially correct; white-collar workers *are* more likely to wear neckties than blue-collar workers. However, his need to create a detailed hierarchy like China's causes him to interpret the meaning of colored neckties and umbrellas incorrectly. We recall that Fantini spoke about the dynamic between the first and the second culture. The sojourner in a new culture, like Kao-tai, actively engages this dynamic by moving from inspection of the outward artifacts to introspection about their meaning. Not until he engages in more introspection, this time about his own home culture, can he move into Bennett's ethnorelative stages.

#### 4) *Acceptance*

Kao-tai begins the stage of acceptance only after he has found a friend, Mr. Shi-shmi, who has given him a place to live. In his speculation about Mr. Shi-shmi's rank he continues:

He has helped me so much, without him I would have had no idea what to do, so that even if he were a court official of the 18th grade who had failed the Academy's literary examination for the seventh and last time I would still respect and love him. The situation I find myself in at present inclines me to the view that rank and success in the literary examination are not the most important criteria in judging human beings. (Letter 5, 26)<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>“Aber, so denke ich mir, er hat mir soviel geholfen, ist mir so nützlich; ja, ohne ihn wüßte ich nicht, was anfangen, daß ich ihn, selbst wenn er ein Hofbeamter der 18. Rangklasse wäre und schon das siebte und letzte Mal bei der Dichterprüfung der Akademie durchgefallen, hochachten und lieben würde. In der Situation, in der ich bin, neigt man zu der Meinung, daß Rang und Dichterprüfung nicht das wichtigste Kriterium für die Bewertung des Menschen sind” (5. Brief, 25).



This is the first time Kao-tai has questioned his own frame, the culture of his own social circle at home, where literary scholarship is all-important. His admiration for Mr. Shi-shmi, who is not a literary scholar, but whom he recognizes as a friend and real “Mensch,” forces him to reinterpret his own values. He realizes that the Chinese way is not the only normal way of behaving and Chinese values are not the only valid measurement of worth.

However, Kao-tai’s big moment of acceptance, his important breakthrough, comes two months into his sojourn. This moment of acceptance comes to him, through big C culture, through a Beethoven string quartet. Mr. Shi-shmi and other amateur musicians regularly get together to play chamber music. This description typifies what Dale Lange describes as the interweaving of c and C, of the informal and formal aspects of life, just as we find in real life, rather than the artificial division between the two that we often make in our instruction (60). It is through this “Celestial Fourfold Harmony” [Himmlische Vierheit] that Kao-tai recognizes that this strange culture truly does have value and through which he finally thoroughly participates in the new culture:

Yesterday evening brought a new revelation for me: in this far-off world there is not only noise, there is also music! . . . I have to admit that I have found so little that is beautiful, so much that is stupid, silly and senseless in this world, that if I am quite honest with myself, deep down inside I was expecting to find their music ugly as well. . . . Although my prejudice against the big noses’ music began to disappear at the very first, soft notes . . . no, to be honest I must put it differently. Although these soft opening notes of the great Master Vay-to-feng made it impossible for me to cling to my prejudice, at first the music still seemed to me incomplete, as if full of arbitrary holes, in some way imprecise and, of course, confusing. But even during the course of that first and in comparison with our music, very short movement, I succumbed to the magic of some passages; I soon began to recognise the return of the melody, and when the movement finished with a passage that began as a soft murmuring and ended like the glassy shimmer of a spring breeze, I had been won over to the music of Vay-to-feng and, quite

possibly, to the music of the bignoses in general. (Letter 15, 115, 117–18)<sup>20</sup>

Just as big C culture, introduced to our students in a literature class or in an art museum, may open up an undiscovered world of a new culture to them, Beethoven's music defeats Kao-tai's prejudices, and makes him more open to finding what is worthwhile in the culture of the West. At last he feels that he is no longer constrained by his own culture.

### 5) *Adaptation*

After this experience with music, Kao-tai moves out of Mr. Shi-shmi's apartment in the suburbs and into the Four Seasons Hotel in downtown Munich. He realizes that in order to gather more experiences and learn new things he has to take some risks. At this stage of adaptation he is ready for the experimentation that will help him test his assumptions about the culture he confronts and he is ready to attempt to live in it and adapt to it without the guidance of Mr. Shi-shmi.

Kao-tai finds one girl-friend and then another. By now he knows enough about Western culture to realize that he must make every attempt to keep the one from learning about the existence of the other. This would not have been necessary in China with his many wives and concubines, but he is now trying to observe the proprieties of the host culture. However, his progress, like that of most sojourners, is not linear. He often encounters set-backs when trying to adapt to the host culture without enough information, or when he over-generalizes and fails to see nuances. For example, he's as shocked as our American students are to

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<sup>20</sup>“Gestern abend war für mich eine Stunde der Offenbarung. Die Stunden — genauer gesagt; es waren zwei Stunden und eine halbe — zeigten mir, daß es in dieser fernen Welt nicht nur Lärm, sondern auch Musik gibt. . . . Ich muß gestehen . . . ich habe in dieser kalten und lauten Welt so wenig Schönes und so viel Dummes, Albernes und Unsinniges vorgefunden, daß ich in meinem Innersten, wenn ich ganz ehrlich in mich hineinhörte, eher geneigt war, auch die Musik dieser Welt häßlich zu finden. . . . Obwohl schon bei den sanften ersten Tönen mein Vorurteil gegen die Musik der Großnasen hinschwinden begann — oder, um es ganz ehrlich zu sagen: obwohl diese sanften ersten Töne des großen Meisters We-to-feng es mir unmöglich machten, weiter an meinem Vorurteil festzuhalten, erschien mir doch die Musik zunächst wie unvollständig, wie willkürlich durchlöchert, auch unfafßbar ungenau und natürlich verwirrend. Aber noch im Lauf dieses ersten — nach unseren Begriffen sehr kurzen — Satzes, ergriff mich doch der Zauber der einen oder anderen Passage, bald schon erkannte ich die Wiederkehr einer Melodie, und als der Satz mit einer leise beginnenden, raunenden, dann wie ein gläserner Frühlingswind flirrenden Passage endete, war ich für die Musik des großen Meisters We-to-feng und damit möglicherweise überhaupt für die Musik der Großnasen gewonnen” (15. Brief, 115, 118–19).

observe the nude sunbathing in Munich's English Garden. When his girlfriend, Mrs. Kei-kung, and a woman he's just met invite him into the sauna, he hesitates, but finally he joins them; after all, when in Munich. . . . So he tries to act as he feels a "Westerner" would, but he commits a grave error, when, as the new woman departs, he bows formally and thanks her for "her kindness in allowing me a vision of her uncommonly voluminous bosom, which reminded me in shape of the holy mountain T'ai-shan and which I would treasure in my memory for evermore" (163, Letter 20).<sup>21</sup> The woman is naturally aghast at his audacity, but Kao-tai cannot understand why. Kao-tai has fallen into this mistake not because he has *no* understanding of the other culture, but precisely because he *thinks* he understands it (see Agar, 234). Kao-tai's incorrect model has over-generalized the openness of the sauna and the nudity in the park to make him assume that his comments about the woman's body are appropriate in this culture and would be welcomed.

#### 6) *Integration*

Kao-tai is not in "Ba-Yan" long enough to be truly integrated into the society, for after all, he has come with the intent of only observing and only staying for eight months. Nevertheless, he at least begins integration into the culture when he realizes he must give up or at least modify some of his Chinese customs, such as celebrating the full moon:

I admit that when I set off on my journey my intention was to continue to observe the rites and customs of my own world, come what may. . . . After only a few days here I excused myself from the rites for the duration of my stay. In this I am supported by the Venerable Master K'ung [Confucius], who repeatedly affirms that when abroad one should adjust one's behaviour in accordance with local circumstances and that it is foolish to try to impose one's own customs on a foreign world. . . . (Letter 22, 177)<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup>"ich sei dankbar . . . für den freundlichen Anblick ihres so über Maßen umfangreichen Busens, der mich an die Formen des heiligen Berges T'ai-shan erinnert habe und den ich als kostbaren Schatz in immerwährender Erinnerung behalten würde" (20. Brief, 165).

<sup>22</sup>"Ich habe mir beim Antritt meiner Reise zwar vorgenommen, für meine Person die Riten und Sitten meiner Welt einzuhalten, komme, was da wolle... So habe ich mich schon nach wenigen Tagen für die Zeit meines Aufenthaltes im Land der Großnasen von den Riten dispensiert. Ich berufe mich dabei auf den Ehrwürdigen Meister K'ung, der immer wieder sagt, daß man sich in der Fremde nach den dortigen Gegebenheiten richten soll und daß es

Kao-tai admits that whenever he listens to Beethoven's music, he forgets his rank, his origins; in other words, in those few moments he actually participates in the culture as a he feels a native would (Letter 26). He has attained the stage of integration if only for a few fleeting moments. At this defining point, shortly before his departure back to the tenth century, he discovers, through observation, inquiry, and patience, that the Bavarians really do have a visible symbol of rank after all, not the necktie but the automobile.

I have tried to demonstrate that reading and discussing Kao-tai's progress through the six levels of Bennett's ethnocentric and ethnorelative stages of intercultural development can be fruitful for students and interns abroad. During the course of their sojourn, I ask students to write about similar situations they have experienced after each of the readings in the novel. Moreover, they can learn to use four-step process of moving from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism outlined above to help themselves see the new culture with ethnorelative eyes and to be aware of their own increasing intercultural competence.

#### THE EMOTIONAL PROCESS

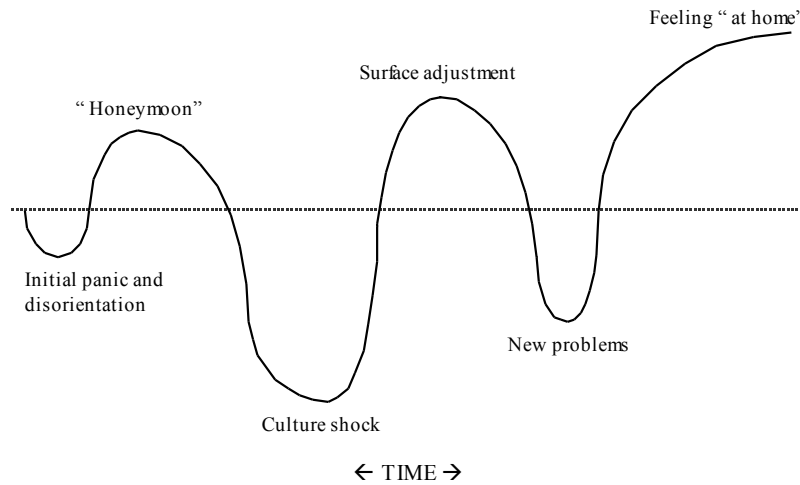
In addition to learning to think about what they see and to becoming ethnorelative, there is a third process with which this novel can help the students. One major step in managing culture shock or culture stress is to realize the naturalness of the roller-coaster of emotions during a sojourn abroad. The expression of utter despair with which this paper began may be only the first stage of a non-linear process.

Researchers and sojourners abroad have advanced various descriptions of emotional adjustment during a new-country experience. Most look more or less like this one.<sup>23</sup>

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töricht ist, dem Fremden die eigenen Sitten und Gebräuche aufdrängen zu wollen." (22. Brief, 179)

<sup>23</sup>Adapted from *The Experiment in International Living*, "Leaders guide to Cross-Cultural Orientation" (Phase II) 1984.



The purpose of using this book or of teaching such a course is *not* to eliminate “culture shock” completely. Although the term often has negative connotations, culture shock is not necessarily detrimental to the student’s development, but can serve, instead, as a pre-condition to growth. Through the shock the student attains an “awareness of the otherness” (Taylor 397). Otherwise our students would be like the unfortunate case of one student who had just returned from a semester in London. At an orientation session for students about to leave for study abroad, she announced in all seriousness, “Oh, you guys won’t have *any* trouble over there—London’s *exactly* like the US!” This student had spent the entire six months never moving out of the denial stage. Remaining completely unaware of the cultural differences, she was unable to be challenged by them, to allow them to help her grow. Her lack of culture shock was not beneficial to her.

We have already met Kao-tai in the depths of despair during the very first moments of his Bavarian sojourn. This is often a period of complete disorientation:

Things I have seen here are so completely different from everything to which you and I are accustomed, that I do not know where to start. Here — actually I shouldn’t say here — I should say now — but this “now” is so unimaginably foreign . . . A

thousand years is not “now” and “then,” a thousand years is “here” and “there.” (Letter 2, 9)<sup>24</sup>

Kao-tai feels that time and place dimensions are displaced. What he imagines is merely a difference in time, is indeed a change of the dimension of place as well; indeed time *was* place, but he doesn’t know that yet. He is truly in the depths of culture shock which lasts for weeks. He laments, “I have not given up hoping that there will be good and useful experiences as well, although sometimes I despair in this fog-hole of a future. Although the weather is reasonably fine, I feel as if I am walking through grey mist. Does it ever lift?” (Letter 4, 24).<sup>25</sup>

Two weeks later Kao-tai has entered the honeymoon stage. His sixth letter begins:

I no longer regret having undertaken this journey at all, although I am still filled with longing for our twilight conversations. . . . I no longer regret my journey through time. Contrary to the gloomy thoughts of my first days here, I am even inclined to say, it is marvellous. It is like a second youth. . . . I look about me like a child, full of wonder, but I know I am full of wonder. (Letter 6, 31)<sup>26</sup>

Kao-tai has made remarkable progress; he has found a friend in Mr. Shishmi and is beginning to learn the language. Like our students, he has memorized a formulaic expression: “Fa-kin lai-yin” [in the German he says “Schai-we-ta” (Scheißwetter)], which he interjects whenever at a

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<sup>24</sup>“Was ich hier erlebe, ist so vollständig anders als das, was Du kennst und was ich gewohnt bin, daß ich gar nicht weiß, womit ich meine Schilderung beginnen soll. Hier — ich müßte eigentlich nicht hier sagen, sondern ‘jetzt’. Aber dieses ‘jetzt’ ist so unvorstellbar fremd . . . Tausend Jahre sind nicht ‘jetzt’ und ‘damals’. Tausend Jahre sind ‘hier’ und ‘dort’” (2. Brief, 8).

<sup>25</sup>“Ich gebe die Hoffnung nicht auf, daß ich auch gute und nützliche Erfahrungen hier machen kann, obwohl ich manchmal verzweifle; in diesem Nebelloch an Zukunft. Nebelloch — ja; obwohl leidlich schönes Wetter herrscht, komme ich mir vor, als ginge ich durch grauen Nebel. Ob er sich jemals verzieht?” (4. Brief, 23).

<sup>26</sup>“Ich bedaure überhaupt nicht mehr, daß ich diese Reise unternommen habe, obwohl ich mich nach wie vor nach den Gesprächen mit Dir in abendlicher Dämmerung . . . sehne. . . . Ich bedaure meine Zeit-Reise nicht mehr. Ich bin sogar fast geneigt — entgegen meinen frühen Gedanken in den ersten Tagen — zu sagen: es ist herrlich. Ich genieße eine neue Jugend . . . Ich schaue wie ein Kind und staune, aber ich weiß, daß ich staune” (4. Brief, 29–30).

loss for words, whether it is raining or not. People in rainy Germany always seem to respond to it.

By the eighth letter he is able to write, “I am very well. . . . I have complete freedom of movement in this world which more and more I find foolish rather than alien.” (Letter 8, 45). His “thirst for knowledge” has overcome his former fears; and he ventures out alone more frequently, even though he now knows that he is not in China any more. By the end of the novel, in his last letters, Kao-tai admits to

a slight feeling of melancholy as I pass through the hall of the Hong-tai of the Four Seasons. For the best part of a year now, this hong-tai, this city of Min-chen has been my home. Wherever you have stayed, even if only for a short time, and whether you were happy or unhappy there, you always leave something of yourself behind. (Letter 36, 268)<sup>27</sup>

He has overcome the stages of culture shock, gone past the initial honeymoon stage of the euphoric newness of it all, and is now able to look at the new culture with an awareness that he is viewing the German culture through his own. Moreover, like our students and interns who feel a degree of sadness as they return home, he has formed a bit of an attachment to this world that he had previously found so completely alien and chaotic. When the students see that this time traveler has experienced emotions similar to their own, it legitimizes their own feelings. By observing that Kao-tai has felt alienation, hope, and despair students see that these are normal emotions, and that they will experience them as well and survive.

Along with Kao-tai, students can see the culture as an outsider and revel in the fact that they can see things that even members of the culture do not. Students will find that they have a lot in common with Kao-tai when Mr. Shi-shmi expresses astonishment that his guest will drink tap water. Here Kao-tai mediates for the students by pointing out a cultural difference they may not yet have encountered — the Germans’ preference for bottled water. They in turn will become what Agar terms “Intercultural Practitioners” as they mentally mediate for Kao-tai. Kao-tai

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<sup>27</sup>“Ich muß gestehen, daß ich ein wenig Wehmut verspüre, wenn ich durch die Halle des Hong-tel ‘Die vier Jahreszeiten’ gehe. Dieses Hong-tel, diese Stadt Min-chen, war doch für fast ein Jahr meine Heimat. Wo immer man war, ob gern oder ungern, und sei es nur kurze Zeit, bleibt ein Stück von einem zurück” (36. Brief, 268).

describes the frightful experience he suffered during his first minutes in “Min-chen” (Munich) in the following manner:

... a large animal — or a fiery demon — came rushing toward me at lightening speed. ... still roaring, then making a bang such as you would only get if you set off the whole Imperial stock of fireworks for the new years celebration, the demon leapt up a tree. (Letter 4,18)<sup>28</sup>

As they read, the students have the twentieth-century frame necessary to know what was really happening before Kao-tai does — that Kao-tai was almost hit by a car. Even before he has discovered that it was neither a wild animal nor a demonic vision, the students will have mediated that meaning for him, and by doing this time and again, will learn to do it for themselves. This reflects the role that student interns may well be called upon to adopt and more certainly will need if working for a multinational firm — that of mediator between the branches of a company in the US and those in other countries, between the management in the US and an engineer in a subsidiary in Germany or a customer in Mexico.

Naturally, we cannot discount some differences between our students and Kao-tai. Our students do have a mapping of the foreign culture in their heads, however inaccurate it may be, whether from contact with German visitors to the US, quaffing a German beer at a local bar, or study in German class. Kao-tai does not, since he had not even known that Germany exists and can have no preconceived notions of that country. Like our students, however, he does have false expectations. He thinks he is in twentieth century China at first and the Germany he encounters does not correspond to those expectations. His frame is wrong, just as our students’ false expectations skew their perceptions and interpretations. The challenge for educators is to make students realize that although they know they are in Germany, or France, or Mexico, their perspectives are informed by what they believe the culture to be. Kao-tai’s LC1 (linguaculture 1: China, 10th century) cannot have been influenced by the LC2 (Bavaria, 20th) while he was in China. Our

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<sup>28</sup>“Gleichzeitig raste mit der Geschwindigkeit eines Blitzes ein großes Tier — oder ein feuriger Dämon, schoß es mir durch den Sinn — auf mich zu. ... Noch immer heulend, dann einen Knall ausstoßend, den man nur erzeugen könnte, wenn man das gesamte kaiserliche Feuerwerksmagazin für das Neujahrsfest auf einmal anzündete, sprang der Dämon, schien es mir, auf einem Baum hinauf.” (4. Brief, 15–16)



students' "American" culture is influenced by German culture before they leave home. The fact that English is a Germanic language, that they may drive Volkswagens or BMWs at home, or that they may be members of a Western religion all color their preconceptions of this "unknown" culture. Despite this initial difference, however, as soon as Kao-tai begins contact with the new culture, he is subject to the same influences our students are. He begins forming suppositions about Bavaria and sees this culture in light of these suppositions.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

The language teaching profession talks a great deal about language learning strategies in the field of language acquisition and we try to make students consciously aware of how they can use strategies to enhance their language acquisition. We have not made as many attempts in the area of culture-learning strategies. Lafayette, Seelye (*Teaching Culture*), Rappaport, and Fantini (*New Ways*) outline numerous activities that can be used in the language classroom or in an orientation session to practice culture-learning strategies. Teachers have used literature for years to teach cultural *content*, but we do not often use literature to teach *strategies* for approaching cultural differences. This novel can serve that very purpose. Analyzing how Kao-tai deciphers cultural meanings and refines his understanding of the culture introduces students to the techniques of observation and interpretation during their stay abroad. They are often so caught up in their emotions that they can not view their experiences with analytical eyes. Analyzing Kao-tai's experiences and laughing about them can help them see their own with a new perspective, and perhaps make them chuckle a bit at themselves. Comparing Kao-tai's emotional stages with their own can help students and interns avoid being overcome by the conflicting emotions they experience in a new culture. By reading and discussing the *Letters Back to Ancient China* students can learn much about their own cultural acquisition process. They can learn the techniques of Kao-tai's intercultural transformation from ethnocentric to ethnorelative:

- by making mistakes and wondering why;
- by observation— of the other culture and one's own;
- by inquiry— asking members of the target culture who know and those who do not;

- by being aware of overt and unconscious feedback from others;
- by becoming aware of the home culture, through which we always see the other;
- by moving from inspection of the other culture as a curiosity to introspection as to why it seems strange to us.

By analyzing this time-traveler they will discern what qualities he had or developed that can make them better culture-travelers: openness, flexibility, resiliency, creativity (Taylor 393), empathy, respect, patience, a sense of humor, and curiosity (Fantini 172). As Kao-tai says, they will indeed be full of wonder, but they will *know* they are full of wonder. It is this conscious knowing that can help them gain the most from their time abroad.

Lange sees as a major contribution of the new National Culture Standards the movement away from culture as information and toward culture as an integrated aspect of language learning (58). In Rosendorfer's novel, these German letters to a Chinese past can be a vehicle through which students strengthen German reading skills and certainly learn about German culture and customs, but most importantly, learn the transferable techniques and strategies for intercultural analysis that will enable them to decipher any culture they encounter. If we wish to train language and business students not to be what Bennett calls "fluent fools," but people who can "mediate worlds," *Letters Back to Ancient China* can be an enjoyable and fruitful way to begin.

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